Reading: Encouraging and Maintaining Individual Extensive Reading

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Reading in a second language is a skill that each language teacher has to strive to help his pupils improve so that they will be better able to benefit from schooling, which is generally reading-based, especially at secondary school and beyond. If a pupil is poor in the target language, he will find it very difficult to understand a text written in that language.

Why Extensive Reading?

This article is an attempt to rationalize the extensive-reading programme, to show its advantages, to discuss some tried means of encouraging and maintaining it, and to show how reading can be linked to other English skills. Before a teacher begins to do anything, he should be clear as to what he wants to achieve and why. Although the reasons may seem obvious, I will state them here. The first question, therefore, is: Why should extensive reading be encouraged?

Extensive reading refers to the less rigorously supervised reading that pupils will do both in and outside the classroom. The texts read will normally be those of their own choosing, even though the teacher's guidance will be crucial at the beginning.

Pupils need to read extensively for the following reasons:

a. Extensive reading exposes them to different registers of the target language that they will meet in varied contexts.

b. Wide reading broadens and increases their vocabulary, which is important for effective communication.

c. Reading a text in its entirety builds confidence, and consistent wide reading aids concentration for reading by expanding their attention span.

d. Skills learned through reading are transferred to other areas of language, such as writing and speaking.

e. In an organized system, the extensive- reading lesson provides a break from the rigour of closely supervised lessons and enables the pupil to get lost in a text that really interests him. It also releases the teacher to do things for the pupils, e.g., discussing titles, reports, etc. This change in routine helps pupils to look forward to the next lesson because of the break in between.

f. Lastly, reading opens up a whole new world, enabling the reader to learn about other people-their cultures and outlooks, and the reasons that they behave in certain ways. It also sharpens judgement, as one's own outlook on life is broadened.

All these reasons, and others, make it imperative that language teachers encourage extensive reading.

Sources and Resources

Before discussing how to encourage or initiate extensive reading, we must consider the resources (books, magazines, journals, etc.) that will be used. Other articles (English Teaching Forum, October 1990, October 1991) have discussed the "class library," so I will not dwell in detail on establishing one, but I will mention some sources of books for such a library.

1. The teacher can ask each pupil to contribute a storybook or magazine. These can be registered and numbered so that eventually, when each pupil has read all the books, or as many of them as his ability permits, they can be returned to the original donors. The teacher needs to go through as many of the books as possible.

2. Other sources include donors, publishing houses, friends of the school, the school itself if it has funds, former students of the school, or even other institutions who may be getting rid of old books.

Once the teacher has established a reading stock, he must start his pupils on the rewarding road of reading books.

How Does the Teacher Ignite Interest in and Curiosity for Reading?

First and foremost, the teacher needs to read the books, so that he can (a) grade them according to difficulty, and (b) provide guidance to pupils on what to read (at least at first) according to their different abilities. Both of these considerations are important, because, as with any learning, there must be a sense of achievement. Success will encourage pupils to desire to read more. If a poor pupil takes a book that is too difficult, he is likely to be frustrated-to read less and not improve his language skills, and therefore read even less (Nuttall 1982).

One way of igniting interest and curiosity is to read interesting bits of the library books to the pupils. Bits that contain interesting and novel information or have humour or interesting uses of language are very good. Short questions and discussions can be encouraged about the pieces, but be sure these do not eat into lessons. Jokes, idioms, and quotations can all be used and discussed during literature or even language-structure lessons.

Secondly, if the teacher notices pupils reading interesting texts, they can be asked to tell the class about what they are or have been reading. The teacher can make up questions to ask the pupils about what they have been told. Thus, they will be listening for a purpose.

Thirdly, parts of texts-very short-can be pinned up on softboards or pasted up at strategic places in the classroom for pupils to glance through on their own time. The title of the book or magazine and the author's name can be attached at the end of each of these short passages, so that pupils will be able to find the book or magazine.

I used this method with Technical Secondary School classes, and the pupils' curiosity and need to read the texts was often quite rewarding. One text that whetted interest in reading was Future Shock, by Alvin Toffler, which had interesting, novel, and sometimes shocking information.

Newspapers, too, proved useful, because they provided springboards for lively discussion over social, political, and economic events. But perhaps the most important function of these extracts is the students' realisation that through reading one is able to gather a lot of interesting and useful information about history, science, politics, people, technology, culture, etc.

Initial Monitoring

Once the available materials have been graded, the teacher should encourage each pupil to take books from a slot that will boost his confidence in reading, by suggesting to him which ones he can comfortably go through. This means that each pupil begins where he is linguistically most comfortable. Ideally, each pupil will move back and forth among the slots (i.e., categories of books, from easy to difficult) as confidence and language improves. Even the stronger pupils will want to read books from the lowest slot, and the teacher should encourage this while at the same time encouraging each pupil to strive to go to the difficult slot. This is why the teacher should be familiar with as many of the books as possible.

Before reading becomes a habit, the teacher needs to be able to monitor each pupils' reading so he can offer guidance, prod lazy pupils, and give encouragement. I found that a simple form like the one below was very useful for (1) getting concrete information on what each pupil was interested in reading, and (2) linking reading and utilization of the language that the pupils had already acquired.

The form might look like this, but it can be modified to suit each situation.

Weekly Book Report

Name of student:

Form: **Adm. No.:**

Author:

Title of book:

Main Character(s)

Other Characters:

What is the story about?

What happens in the end?

Did you like the story? Why or why not? (This could be even a book of poems, etc.

List 10 new, interesting words you learned from the story or article.

Use (3, 4, or 5) new words in your own sentences.

Copy out what struck you most in the article/story.

The teacher will need to explain to his pupils who an author is, what terms like main characters and minor characters mean, and other terms that may prove troublesome. He also needs to keep a record book of what pupils are reading. In many developing countries, where resources are scarce, a simple exercise book with a page for each pupil and the titles of books he has read will do, e.g.,

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John Kumbe

Title	Author	Dates
Things Fall Apart	*Chinua Ackebe*	*July 10-21*

If a teacher is dealing with more than one class, a separate book should be kept for each class. The book-report forms mentioned earlier are to ensure that each pupil is reading. Initially, the teacher should insist that pupils read within seven days whatever books they take. The teacher should provide a library lesson when the students can hand in reports and exchange books. Limiting the time helps a pupil realize that he cannot read one text forever.

Once this cumbersome stage is past, the teacher can allow more freedom and be less rigorous in his insistence on the filling in of forms. If a library lesson (extensive reading lesson) is provided in the timetable, the teacher will need to take a few minutes at the beginning to check what everyone is reading. Filling in forms helps in guidance; a pupil who starts off wanting to read only comics can be helped to broaden his interests by suggestions about interesting titles. Ideally, the teacher should help his pupils read broadly: autobiographies, magazines, newspapers, science fiction, other fiction, biographies, detective stories, jokes, and anecdotes. Reading different types of writing will expose pupils to varieties of language use according to subject and intent. Once reading is established, however, there have to be ways of maintaining it and motivating pupils to do it on their own. I have found the following methods useful in providing such motivation.

Motivation for Reading

1. Start from pupils' reports, taking time to discuss what they are reading. This technique has a twofold benefit: It boosts individual morale as the teacher focuses on individuals during discussions, and the teacher can probe pupils on their perceptions of and reactions to what they have read.

2. Pupils who read the most books can be rewarded with small tokens at the end or middle of the term. These tokens need not be expensive-they can be as simple as exercise books, pens, mathematical sets, or small story or poetry books. They can be got from the pupils themselves through small monetary contributions. What they should be can be discussed with the pupils, because, after all, it is they who will be buying or receiving them.

3. Interesting book reports can be pasted up or pinned to the softboard so that other pupils will be encouraged to read them. One important way to provide motivation in extensive reading is to link it with actual language lessons by tying it to other language skills. This helps the pupil realise that he can do his best. I try to have each pupil compete not so much against other pupils as to do his own best.

In oral-language classes the teacher can include oral reports. In these, pupils can discuss what they have read or have been reading, what their reactions were, what they liked or did not like. If it is a story, what it was about. The teacher can start by giving an example to show his pupils how to be as detailed as possible without being too long. These oral sessions need not be simply

about books but could include other topics on which pupils give impromptu speeches. This reduces boredom, because there will be certain topics on which they can speak with ease-for instance, the dining hall, if one is teaching in a boarding school.

Compositions could include such topics as “The Best Story I Have Read,” which could be prepared and written in groups, and “My Best (or Worst) Character.” The latter subject will allow pupils to describe the character they like best-his physical features (which incidentally may not even be mentioned in the book) and what they liked about him. Alternatively, pupils can be asked to make sketches of the main characters in the books they are reading. Our reactions to people always affect how we see them, whether as beautiful or ugly.

Relation to Other Skills and Subjects

With consistent reading the teacher should begin to see an improvement in the pupils’ oral and written language, and reading can easily be linked to other language skills-speaking, listening, and writing. The writing of reports, discussed above, is just one way of providing this link. Extensive reading can also provide mutual reinforcement with the class reading-book in the sense that what is learned from either can be used to deepen the understanding of the other. Pupils will also normally transfer the linguistic benefits from their reading to their writing. They will want to use in the writing exercises expressions, idioms, and new vocabulary that they have acquired from their extensive reading. The teacher should encourage this by rewarding original usages while at the same time guiding those whose experiments with new items do not come up to expectation.

Further Suggestions

As reading goes on, the teacher will want to discuss with the class portions of pupils’ compositions that are worthy of credit, asking the class to identify what they think is good. I have found that this sensitizes pupils to how language can be used and to the fact that one way of saying a thing may be better than another. As a rule, I do not discuss weak essays and compositions in class even when there is immense improvement. A pupil who, for example, has been getting 10/40 may have scored 17/40; but, while this is immense improvement, it may not be fair to read the composition to a class where pupils have scored 24 and above. However, I always acknowledge what is good in even the weakest of compositions without exposing the writer to ridicule. Acknowledging what is good should have a spill-over effect on the other subject areas, in that pupils will want to do their best most of the time.

Even when the reading habit has been well established, the teacher should always take time to share with his pupils interesting bits of what he himself has read from newspapers, storybooks, journals, history books, etc. This will make them want to read more as they realise that knowledge gives power and that there is no time when one can say that he has read enough.

I have found that this extensive-reading programme works well and that a library lesson begins to be one of the most looked-forward-to lessons, one of the quietest, and one in which time flies

the fastest because each person (the teacher included) is engrossed in something that takes all his attention.

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